

Name of Method: Public participation, consultation and questionnaires

Summary of Method: The method is generally viewed as one of the commonest approaches used to assist in the assessment of potential impact, although it is not generally used to provide definite answers. The method can involve the use of members of the public, government agencies, regulators etc. It is essentially based on the principle of requesting input and comment from external sources, to gain information on the issues of concern, available data and potential impacts (perceived or otherwise). It can also be a useful tool to identify additional sources of data. The approach enables information on a wide range of issues to be gathered, which may not always be immediately apparent particularly where they relate to local issues or concerns. For cumulative and in-combination assessments, it is often difficult to gather information on other plans and projects, with the method providing an ideal opportunity to highlight the plans and projects known and to request either confirmation of the completeness of the list or details of additional plans or projects where they had been missed.

The method is particularly useful to ensure the quality, comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the assessment and that the public's views are taken into consideration.

Advantages of Method: Ensures the involvement of interested parties and enables potentially significant issues to be highlighted at an early stage. Enables the identification of additional datasets and literature sources. Can help focus further studies to the areas or topics most likely to represent significant issues to a proposal. It is a flexible method that considers potential impacts early on and can be focused to specific information.

Limitations of Method: The method is limited by the experience and knowledge of the consultees, the willingness or ability of the consultees to participate and the level of support or opposition for the proposal by the consultees. It can therefore be prone to errors of subjectivity, can be time consuming and have a poor response. The focus is often on the obvious and attractive (such as mammals) rather than issues such as habitat fragmentation.

References: European Commission Directorate General – Environment, Nuclear Safety and Civil Protection, 1999. Guidelines for the Assessment of Indirect and Cumulative Impacts as well as Impact Interactions.
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